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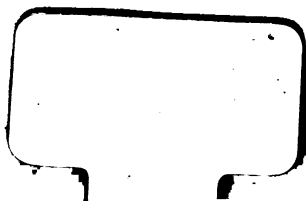
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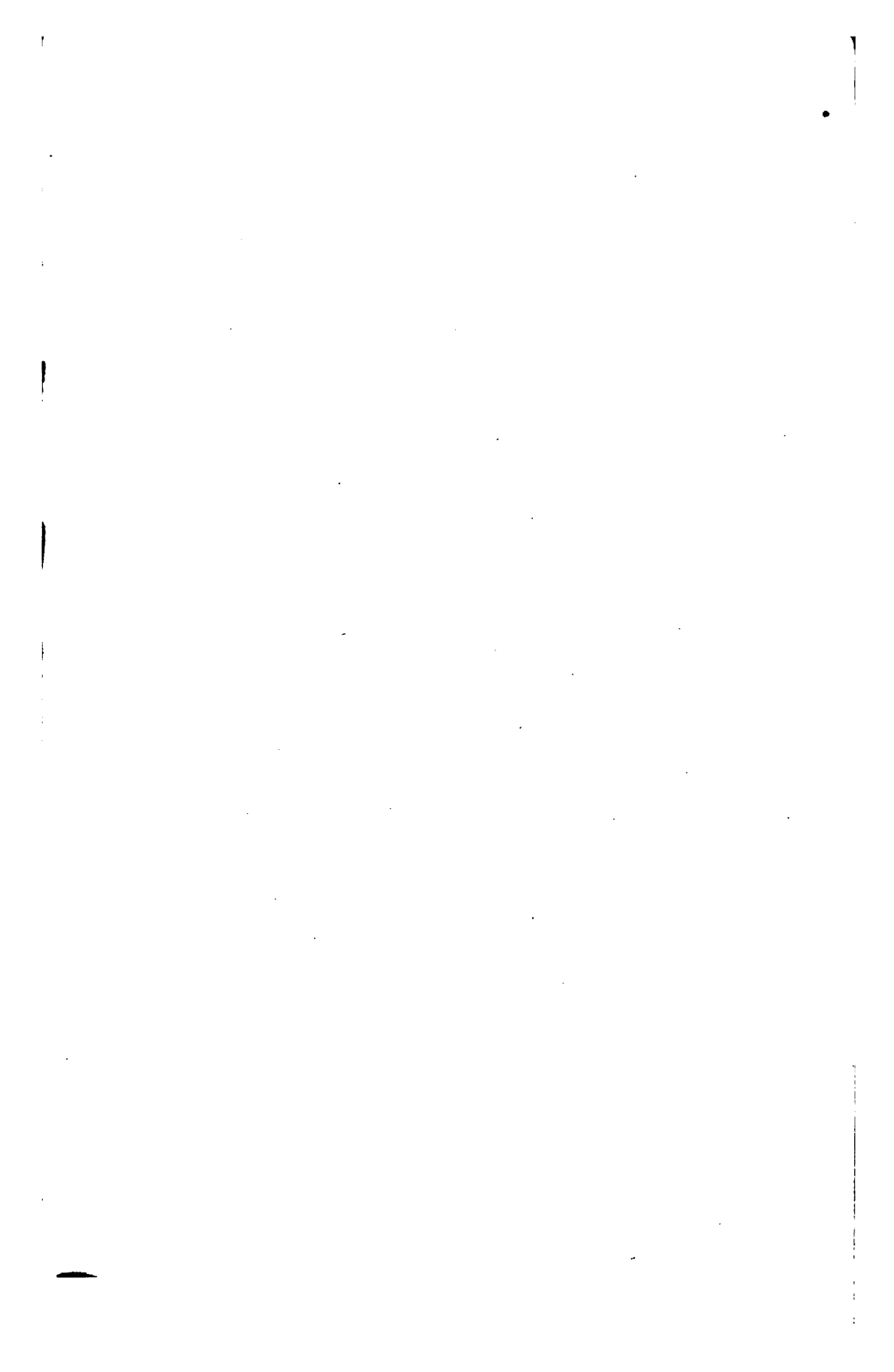
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The Office and Limits of Literary  
Criticism.

*The Chancellor's*

A PRIZE ESSAY

READ IN

THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 9, 1869,

BY

HENRY DE BURGH HOLLINGS, B.A.

FELLOW OF CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE.



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*Sh. 131*

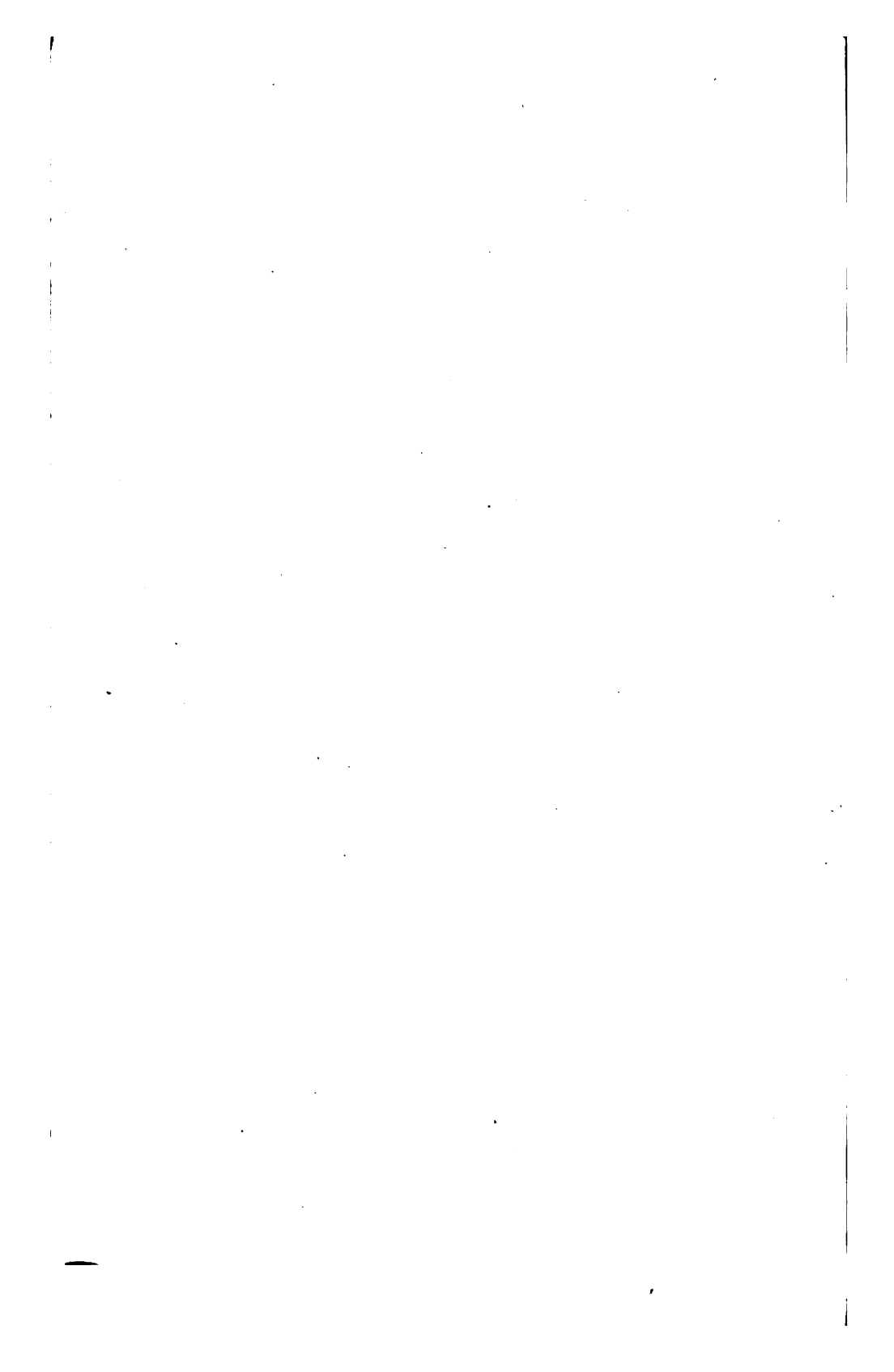
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## The Office and Limits of Literary Criticism.

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IF we look in Johnson's Dictionary, we find what at first sight appears a harmless and commonplace definition of criticism. The office of a critic is "to write remarks upon any performance of literature, to point out faults and beauties in composition." Let us turn to M. Renan. In his essay upon Channing<sup>a</sup> he thus estimates his literary merits:—"Il n'a pas ce sentiment délicat des nuances qui s'appelle la critique, sans lequel il n'y a pas d'entente du passé, ni par conséquent d'intelligence étendue des choses humaines." There is only a century between Dr. Johnson and M. Renan, yet Johnson's words might have been written in 'dusty Alexandria' in the third century before Christ. We seem to be hearing the last echoes of a strain of verbal and formal criticism that lasted from the time of the Greek grammarians and rhetoricians, until it filled the salons and academies of Europe during the whole of the seventeenth and the earlier part of the eighteenth century. Then came a rush of intellectual energy, followed by an age of political dissolution, and as a natural consequence by larger modes of thought and judgment. The older, or classical school of literary criticism, occupied itself chiefly with the form of composition, that is, with the purity and harmony of its language, and with certain canons of propriety and dignity which were generally accepted by men of letters, and corresponded to the famous unities of time and place in the drama considered as an art. If we open Quintilian or Dionysius, we find hard-and-fast rules of good writing, dissertations on the use of metaphors and rhetorical devices generally; we find also, it is true, many acute remarks on isolated merits or de-

<sup>a</sup> "Etudes d'Histoire religieuse," p. 374.

fects of authors, but the whole tone is artificial, it is created, as it is, by a desire not to sympathise largely and deeply with the spirit of a great writer, but, in Johnson's language, *to point out faults and beauties*. This last attempt may at times be useful, but at the best it is but a sorry compliment to the men of genius who wrote, and to the enlightened few who read them with true enthusiasm. Plato has passages that rise above even *his* wonted level, yet the undying charm of his master-works is one; one note of deep music runs through all. So it is with Shakespeare. One play as *he* conceived it fascinates us more than the whole herbarium of Dr. Dodd, who employed himself in plucking up the choicest flowers of his genius by the roots. Much praise is due, it must be confessed, to these colder critics. For instance the Alexandrian scholars did much to fix and purify the Greek language, and to them we owe the preservation of the noblest writings of the Hellenic race, while the Roman rhetoricians in their turn kept up a tradition of style, and may at times have quickened a lower but genuine inspiration in sterile ages. Again, when we reach modern times, it is impossible to overvalue the contributions of the French academicians to the proper understanding of some ancient authors and to the ennobling of their own language and literature. But still it is not unfair to say that while they did much to clear up Greek and Latin, and to organize their own tongue, they did little towards a fuller understanding of the Greek and Roman genius as incarnated in literature, or towards quickening the intellectual pulse of their own age.

Boileau, with his *Art Poétique*, is but a small advance on Horace. The happiest passages in Addison are not his literary criticisms, but his thoughts on men and manners. He was a good scholar, yet his sympathies in literature were all but bounded by the silver age of Latin poetry. There is, however, in Addison one bright exception to this general narrowness. He defended the nobleness of Milton against the unworthy sneers of Buckingham, whose very blasphemies against genius were pilfered from the French<sup>b</sup>.

<sup>b</sup> Cf. Warton's Ed. of Pope, vol. i. 243, note. "If you scruple," says Addison, "to give the title of an Epic Poem to the 'Paradise Lost' of Milton, call



And what of them? Boileau depreciates the inimitable Tasso, of whose very language he was ignorant<sup>c</sup>. Fontenelle levels his puny shaft against Homer<sup>d</sup>. Perrault, with all his taste and delicacy, has nothing better to do than to carp at Pindar<sup>e</sup>.

Voltaire, with his burning words, was destined to set Europe in a flame, yet he seems to have valued his harsh, and it must be said, his barbarian literary judgments far above his powerful critical philosophy. In lesser men like Johnson we pardon such Vandalism, but it is a painful thought that Voltaire should have attacked one of his own company, a genius at least co-equal, Shakespeare.

Europe will ever be indebted to the Academicians of France, —but still their purification of style, such as perfected the Provincial Letters of Pascal, was not so much literary criticism as a delicate mechanical art, acting on an exquisite organ, the French language; while their other great work cannot be mentioned here, but will be touched on later.

We accept, then, fully the modern sense of the phrase Literary Criticism, as meaning, not so much the examination of the form, as an attempt to penetrate the spirit, of literature; as not concerned so much with language, and with abstract canons, as with high thought and passion.

In this view the only "felicity of diction" is saying something worth saying in nervous language; the only "sublimity," the intense expression of intense emotion. Round this aspiring literary criticism are grouped the kindred studies of political, social, and artistic criticism. Often, indeed usually, they are subtly interfused, but without pedantry, or an affectation of scientific vigour where no science exists: it may be possible for us to consider literary criticism, criticism of the human spirit gathered up in literature, as a distinct art.

Its broader limits, its frontier-level, as it were, between science, theology, and history, cannot be seen until we have formed a full theory of its great functions. Its narrower

it, if you choose, *a Divine Poem*: give it whatever name you please, provided you confess that it is a work as admirable in its kind as the 'Iliad.' Cf. also 318, 19, note.      <sup>c</sup> Ib., 318, n.      <sup>d</sup> Ib., 256, n.      <sup>e</sup> Ib., 240, n.

limits, certain regions where it has but little place, can now be traced out. Literary criticism does not deal much with ephemeral writings, or with the lighter forms of prose in general.

Not with ephemeral writings. Passing sketches, fleeting *vers de société*, light comments on follies or passions of the hour, crude draughts of political or social changes, all, in a word, that makes up light literature and journalism, is not fit matter for the true literary critic. Not that he will scorn such trifles, or pass no judgment, but the great mass of educated men and women can do this for themselves. No special insight, no special sympathy, is needed. The literature with which the critic deals in earnest must be great, noble, and comprehensive; or if not that, at least it must be typical, it must be eloquent of coming strength, or eloquent of transition and decay. It must be the pledge of a new intellectual age; or, to borrow the words of a living speaker on Shakespeare, "the blossom of a culture that is dying."

Not with prose. It is clear that simple, straightforward writings, like narratives, biography, or letters, scarcely need the literary critic. There is or ought to be but slender art. Every charm and every fault is on the surface; no great intellectual phases or spiritual moods, excepting possibly the correspondence of a few men of genius, like Lacordaire, are there summed up.

On the other hand, lofty and ambitious prose, like history, is too scientific, too self-conscious, too analytic, to have much need of the literary critic. It analyses itself. Too self-conscious it is for criticism in this sense only, that the historian continually tries to illuminate his meaning. History is not self-conscious in the sense in which that word expresses the highest poetry, it is not penetrated by one powerful human soul, and therefore it is less fit for literary criticism. By prose of course is meant prose in spirit. The Byzantine monk<sup>1</sup>, who wrote a description of Helen in eleven hexameters and some twenty epithets, wrote blank prose in spite of his metre. But the prose of "Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for

<sup>1</sup> Constantinus Manasses: quoted in Lessing's "Laocoon," ch. xx. p. 135.

*the love that he had to her*," is poetry. The poor miner who lately called out to his fellow when the deadly night fell upon the coal-pit, "*the light in heaven is not gone out*," spoke deep poetry. Most of Herodotus is prose in form alone. The mystic experiences of St. Theresa and Swedenborg, though told in prose, are poems. What, again, are the "*Paroles d'un Croyant*," that gather up the later agonies of the soul of Lamennais, but one great lyrical burden<sup>b</sup>? So much for the plainer limits of literary criticism. What are its functions? To dogmatise about anything so subtle, so full of a light play of thought and feeling, as well as of intense sympathy, would indeed be folly, but it may be pardoned if a distinction is made between two of its subordinate functions and its supreme offices.

These lesser functions are to sift and to popularise. It is part of the critic's duty to winnow the chaff from the grain of literature, or, to change the comparison, to extinguish some lesser lights that are not of genius. At times shallow thinking, if couched in sufficient obscurity, false notes of feeling, if sufficiently sonorous, captivate the people. In his continual protest against intellectual and moral quackery, against an attempt to fix imperfect or morbid phases, the critic will condemn much lower literature without pity.

But even here the literary critic has but little work. These are tasks better fit for his weaker brother, the reviewer; and nature vindicates herself. In every age the lesser, narrower, colder, writers disappear. They live, perhaps, in a favourable critique of Aristotle's, in a passing sarcasm of Longinus. They live perhaps in the Dunciad. This work is done, less by literary critics, less by academies, though both these help, than by the judgment of the world. As in Natural History, as in Theology, so in Literature, there is an eternal process of natural selection. The weaker plants and animals die off; the less logical theories, the less sound conclusions, the less healthy spiritual moods, all fade and perish: and the same with books:—

"Ages of heroes fought and fell,  
That Homer in the end might tell,

<sup>a</sup> Gen. xxix. 20.

<sup>b</sup> Cf. M. Renan, "*Lamennais*," pp. 176—178.

O'er grovelling generations past,  
 Upstood the Doric fane at last ;  
 And countless hearts on countless years  
 Had wasted thoughts and hopes and fears,  
 Rude laughter and unmeaning tears,  
 Ere England Shakespeare saw, or Rome  
 The pure perfection of her dome."—*Clough*, pp. 90, 91.

The critic is, on the whole, content to wait for the judgment of the world at large. We may say with St. Augustine, "*Securus judicat orbis terrarum.*" Again, it is a subordinate function of the critic to supply some aid to less keen intellects, to fire some colder hearts. His great work is doubtless with the strong, but still he does not despise the weak. To give the key of knowledge, to popularise noble literature, is itself a noble act. With literature that is itself popular there is little need of this. Poetry like Longfellow's, full as it is of true tenderness, of true sympathy with the more outward meaning and the less hidden charms of nature, is still only popular: its key of feeling is not much higher than that of the whole class of sensitive and reflecting men and women. The difference is not so much in intensity as in expression. *Evangeline* is sweet and touching. So is Mr. Lowell's exquisite little poem of *Rhæcus*<sup>1</sup>. Each are sounded on a single note,—the consecration of common love and sorrow, and the consecration of common nature; but the compass of each idea is narrow: so it is also with popular religious poetry, even with the best. Keble must be excluded, for though popular in the sense that he is widely read, his deeper merits, like Mr. Tennyson's, are exactly those which are most neglected, and which need most interpretative criticism. His conception, for instance, of the relation of man to nature is hard to grasp. It is not the simple loving mood of the American poets. Some would call it forced and tortuous, neither Hellenic nor modern, but, to use a harsh word, monkish; but really popular literature, above all popular poetry, in virtue of its own peculiar excellence, may safely be left with those who inspired it, and who find their experiences artlessly reproduced in it—the people. So much for the minor functions of literary criti-

<sup>1</sup> Lowell's Misc. Poems, vol. i. 63—66.

cism. What are its supreme duties? They may be summed shortly, and of course inadequately, as twofold :—*Interpretation, rather for the few than for the many, of the highest literature—poetry, in its highest manifestations; and authoritative correction of some special faults of a literary caste as such.*

*Interpretation of the highest poetry.*—If we believe that the life of our race is organic, that while in some sense the past lives in the present, in another it is past for most of us, just as our own life day by day fades from us—if we believe this, and in doing so we are following the impulse of the modern world, we can feel but meagre satisfaction in mere political or military history. Even social and artistic history gives too little. In none of these forms do we find what we want most, a gathering up of the most vivid life of past ages; an absorbing sense of what the men of old, when at their best, both thought and felt; how far they realised the mystery of human life, how far they solved it; how far, and this is the most vital question of all, how far they conceived life and the world differently. No erudition, no unaided sympathy, however genuine, can do this. What then are we to do? Where are we to look? To that which incarnates the most intense experiences of our race—to literature of the noblest kind, to the Hebrew poets and prophets, to the Iliad, to the Divine Comedy, to Hamlet, to Faust. Coleridge somewhere calls a cathedral a petrified religion. He was right. Compared with poetry the plastic arts are cold, and of them architecture is the coldest, the least suggestive of any personality in the artist. But great poetry is ever warm with life. It would be impossible to conceive the personality of the builder of Cologne Cathedral, except that he must have been a man of strange wild energy. It would be hard to reconstruct the Raphael of history out of his divine works. It would be easy to extract a true Dante, though every memorial of him had perished, from the Divine Comedy, where he lives and suffers and is purified eternally. Therefore we may say fearlessly that the great poems of the world, till others like them appear, will be the chief, the

finest, the richest material for literary criticism. They are the most precious, the most inexhaustible mine. More has been written, and will be written, about Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, than about the whole company of lesser writers; and justly. Man and the world, as interpreted by a few poems of transcendent genius—this will be the critic's great subject. Each age, perhaps, will have to interpret them afresh—to realise the relation between the less substantial phases of the present and those eras where a fuller intellectual or spiritual life has been summed up in a great work of literary art. Still criticism will not contemplate these masterpieces severed from their context. It will examine collateral literature, partly as an explanation, partly as a counterpoise of the classical poems of the world. It will realise the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* more vividly by comparing them with Apollonius Rhodius, and Quintus Calaber, emptied as *they* are of all that makes Homer divine. The intensity of Dante will be felt more keenly by contrasting him with the poets of the decadence, with Boccaccio and Tasso, where, to use a phrase of Mr. Ruskin's, there is only illumination as distinct from inspiration. Again, the fresh idylls of Palestine may be placed side by side with the fascinating but learned and artificial Theocritus, even if we contemplate the poems of Judæa on their literary and æsthetic side alone. Their afflatus we could find nowhere, not even in Homer. Our own Shakespeare must be viewed as 'the bright particular star' of the whole Elizabethan galaxy, while we shall understand the imperial age—Wordsworth and Byron's age—of English poetry still better in the light of Cowper and Burns, who shed the first rays of the new simplicity. Thirdly, literary criticism will not be content with great poems and their border-land; it will strive also to interpret and set before us lucidly such great ages as are expressed by brilliant clusters of literature, although not yet in one supreme poem. Of these, it will be enough to mention here, the Augustan age of Rome, the Spanish casuists and mystics, the poetry of the Celts, and the Catholic reaction in the France of this century.

Thus literary criticism will make its chief work,—

I.—The Interpretation of Great Poems.

„ „ of their lesser surroundings.  
 „ „ of great ages without one perfect  
 „ expression.

II.—The authoritative correction of purely intellectual faults.

I. Interpretation of great poems.

The grander moods of human passion and aspiration have on the whole taken three forms in the highest literature—*heroism*, *austerity*, and what, for want of a better name, may be called *fulness*, *many-sidedness*, though both these words are poor equivalents. Heroism is embodied most perfectly in the Homeric poems, and in them alone. Austerity, in its pre-Christian and Oriental form, colours the drama of Job; in its medieval form it is cast in the matchless mould of the Divine Comedy in Italy, and the *Autos Sacramentales* of Calderon in Spain. While these live the Middle Ages live in literature. As for the modern spirit, which we have called many-sidedness from its very nature, it is too large for the deepest and amplest poem, but much of it is centred in Shakespeare and Milton, in Goëthe, and in the great English school of half-a-century ago. More or less exactly literary criticism must be drawn within the attraction of these powerful foci, and these potent masters. Let us take them in order, and start with Homer and his ‘faultless mirror’ of the old heroic world. How does Pope treat him, how does Longinus, how does a modern of the moderns like Mr. Froude? In the Preface to his translation of the Iliad, Pope has many excellent remarks on Homer. They are such as might be expected from a man of letters who was himself a poet. Homer of all men had the most ‘invention,’ as he calls it. His work is “a wild Paradise,” like the great army that he described<sup>k</sup>, his words “pour along like a fire that sweeps the whole earth before it.” His “strong and ruling faculty was like a powerful star, which in the violence of its course drew all things within its vortex.” He praises his exquisite epithets, his noble and Biblical simpli-

<sup>k</sup> Οἱ δ' ἄρ' ἔσαν, ὥς τε πυρὶ χθὼν πάντα νέμοιτο.

city; he praises the width and grasp of his imagination in words which might stand as a definition of genius<sup>1</sup>. Without sharing the idolatry of Madame Dacier, he believes Homer to be inimitable, and despairs of doing him justice in his translation. In his Postscript to the *Odyssey*, he defends the greatness of that marvellous poem against the shallow critics who were always on the look-out for the "sublime," and who could not discern the co-equal merit of an epic, pitched in a lower key, perhaps, but still with its own propriety and grace. Pope's answer comes to this,—every great work must be judged by its own standard. The *Odyssey* is true to itself, although it differs from the *Iliad* just as Raphael's *School of Athens* differs from his *Battle of Constantine*.

All this is excellent. It is full of sensitive refinement. But it is not true literary criticism; it does not shew us the soul of Homer. There is a mortal coldness about the whole. It is the work of a man who lived in a polished and learned but still an artificial and isolated age; an age that had forgotten the past, and that made no effort to live in it; that had obtained no sound view of history; in a word, that understood much of the forms of Greek and Roman literature, but as little of their inner spirit, as it understood of the inner spirit of the mediæval Church. The eighteenth century was as incapable of drinking in the spirit of Homer as it was of drinking in the spirit of Dante.

Let us turn to Longinus. "Sublimity," he says, and by that word he means genius simply, and not the sublime of the French rhetoricians, "sublimity is the echo of a mighty soul, voiceless, perhaps, but potent like the great silence of Ajax in the *Nekuia*. To write immortal works a man must have a generous soul. To gather up the soul's master-passions, and to fuse them in the fire of genius, this is sublimity. It is matter, not of volume, but of intensity<sup>2</sup>." Homer is *his* type of this genius. He chooses for

<sup>1</sup> "His imagination, to which all things in their various views presented themselves in an instant."

<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to do justice to this wonderful critic, who reads like a modern man of genius, in a few extracts. So I have ventured to connect and



special praise the Battle of the gods, where Pluto trembles lest hell should be rent open; the everlasting hills quaking under Possidon's tread; the prayer of Ajax, *ἐν δὲ φάει καὶ ὀλεσσον*. But his most delicate and sympathetic criticism is on the Odyssey. "It is less sublime, the fight is over, the heroes are dead, there is a later gloom. The Iliad is full of action, swift and passionate; the Odyssey is full of talk and long-drawn out. It is the epilogue of the Iliad; there is less fire, less vision. The storms, the story of the Cyclops, and other touches, are sublime, but it is old age, though Homer's. What shall we say of the wine-sack, the tale of Circe and her weeping swine, as Zoilus called them; of Zeus and the dove, of the ten-days' fast of Ulysses, of the whole web of marvels? Are they not god-like dreams? The great ocean of Homer's soul was ebbing<sup>n</sup>." There is a genuine ring about these words. We feel instinctively that Longinus is trembling on the verge of the secret of Homer. He was a Greek, and writing of the first of Greeks; he had a soul of deeper subtilty and tenderness than the brilliant Pope's, but something yet is wanting. He lived too early in the world. The modern age has what *he* needed, a rich and boundless experience of the infinite possibilities of human life and passion, of the infinite moods in which our world realises itself. In the light of Hebrew antiquity, in the lurid glare of the 'wars of the Lord,' in the light of the Niebelungen Lied and the wild epic fragments of Scandinavia, in the light of the mystic chivalry of Sir Percival and the middle ages, we understand the fiery side of the Homeric picture. The sweet pastorals of Ruth and Canticles, of the harvest-fields of Bethlehem and the fragrant mountain-slopes of Lebanon, lend an undying fascination to the lovely glimpses of patriarchal and household life in the Eighteenth Book of the Iliad and throughout the Odyssey. Take Mr. Froude as an instance of a true modern interpreter of the spirit of the Homeric age<sup>o</sup>. The contrast

paraphrase a few remarks of his from the *De Sublim.* 9—12. (Reiske, ed. 1805).

Cf. esp. *μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα*.

<sup>n</sup> I have again paraphrased from *δῆλος γὰρ ἐκ πολλῶν το ἡθολογουμένη*.

<sup>o</sup> "Short Studies on Great Subjects—Homer."

even with Longinus is refreshing; there is life and warmth. We have a quickening sense that we feel Homer, that is, the patriarchal age of Hellas, truly. It is like passing from a well-stored library into a fresh spring morning. Mr. Froude comes to Homer reverently and joyfully. He does not dare to point out faults or even beauties. Both there are, but this is not his work. He tells us to come to Homer and learn, to read him as reflecting the old Greek world, simply, clearly, and perfectly. That is his literary criticism of Homer. We need not write it here. The Iliad represents one phase of Greek life, when men were strong and simple, taking life fully and innocently; pious, but with a very small decalogue; fighting, but not revelling in blood; thirsting for excitement and for glory, but not 'drinking the blood of the slain' like a grim hero of Northern Europe. That is one of Mr. Froude's most subtle criticisms; the battles of Homer are not the whole or even the most striking part of the Iliad.

After reminding us thus that the Iliad is a complete picture of the whole of the earliest Greek life, Mr. Froude adds a most striking criticism on the Odyssey.

The Iliad is a complete picture of the *whole* of the earliest Greek life. His other most striking criticism is his view of the Odyssey. Abandoning for ever the foolish and sterile question whether it is less perfect than the Iliad, he points out that it marks a later stage in human history—it is more wonderful. Man is feeling his way through the physical as through the spiritual world. The Odyssey re-creates Greek and in it human life at a further point. On the one side it sums up the impression of the natural world on the first voyagers. It is the Hellenic counterpart of the Celtic legend of St. Brandan's wanderings through mystic seas and mystic islands, where sorrow was no more, or where the very birds sang matins, or where the awful lamps never went out before a solitary altar<sup>p</sup>. On the other it

<sup>p</sup> Cf. Renan, *Essais de Morale et de Critique*, 442-6: "La légende de Saint Brandan est sans contredit le produit le plus singulier de cette combinaison du naturalisme celtique avec le spiritualisme chrétien. . . . Chaque pas de cette *Odyssée monacale* est une merveille: chaque île est un monastère où les

is the burden of human life. No Eastern glamour *here*, no scented airs as from Bretagne or from Arabia. It is the problem of humanity being hourly deepened,—the mystery of good and evil is gathering, the ‘abyss of the human soul’ is opening, the phantoms in the world beyond the grave begin to thicken. We have done with *Heroism*. Next we have placed *Austerity*.

In its earliest and pre-Christian form we have said that the drama of Job embodies this conception of human life. As a conception it is one of those which have moulded the world, or rather which are integral parts of the world. In this divine poem it is stated broadly, simply, and majestically, for its obscurity to *us* is a matter of language, owing to our imperfect grasp of the instrument, the Hebrew tongue. Till Bishop Lowth, we have lately been reminded<sup>1</sup>, the world was ignorant that the noblest parts of the Old Testament were also the noblest literature—poetry, and therefore that they are grand classical subjects for the most aspiring literary criticism. And of these poems, Job is the most artistit. In a simple dress it wraps up the most tremendous problem, the relation of man to God. Unlike the Divine Comedy, it deals with this world, not with the next. Like Goëthe’s Faust, it begins in heaven and is worked out on earth. Each has a prologue in the presence of the Lord.

But perhaps the drama of Job is too remote, too familiar, bizarreries d’une nature fantastique repondent aux étrangetés d’une vie tout idéale. Ici c’est l’île des Brebis, ou ces animaux ce gouvernent eux-mêmes selon leurs propres lois : ailleurs, le paradis des oiseaux, où la race ailée vit selon la règle des religieux, chantant matines et laudes aux heures canoniques : Brandan et ces compagnons y célèbrent la pâque avec les oiseaux, et y restent cinquante jours, nourris uniquement du chant de leurs hôtes : ailleurs, l’île délicieuse, idéal de la vie monastique au milieu des flots. Aucune nécessité matérielle ne s’y fait sentir ; les lampes s’allument d’elles-mêmes pour les offices et ne se consomment jamais, c’est une lumière spirituelle ; un silence absolu règne dans toute l’île : chacun sait au juste quand il mourra : on n’y ressent ni froid, ni chaud, ni tristesse, ni maladie de corps, ou d’esprit.” The passage is too remarkable a parallel to the Odyssey not to deserve quotation.

<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, Confess., x. 2: “Abyssus humanæ conscientiæ.”

<sup>2</sup> Dean Stanley’s article on Keble, Macmillan’s Magazine, February, 1869. Compare Lowth “De Sacra Hebræorum Poesi,” especially Prælectiones, xxxii. —xxxiv., on the Book of Job.

and yet too sacred, to be a perfectly firm ground for literary criticism, and we may therefore pass on, without lingering longer, to the next great poem with man and the world in the fullest sense for its burden, the poem of *mediæval austerity*, the Divine Comedy. By a strange atonement the same country has produced its bitterest enemy and its most passionate admirers. If the end of the seventeenth and the whole of the eighteenth century had one notable blindness it was an absolute incapacity to understand the middle ages, a deep indifference to the marvellous beauty of Gothic architecture. "Gothic" was a decent way of saying barbarous. It was supposed by the most indulgent to cover a certain amount of rude energy, but a rude energy that sinned unpardonably against every canon of art. Evelyn was a Christian scholar, and a man of peculiar refinement and sensibility, yet his condemnation of the masterpieces of mediæval architecture is curt and merciless, "Gloomy monkish piles." An Oxford writer of Charles the Second's time, evidently a man of letters, dismisses one of the most exquisite church-towers in this University as "a good plain thing." So it was with the Divine Comedy in the hands of the first speculative genius and of the first literary critic of his age, Voltaire. His severe and masculine judgment, and his purity of taste within certain limits, cannot be too highly praised. In his place he is supreme, but his deep defects in criticising Dante may shew how modern a product is sympathising, as opposed to judicial and solvent, criticism; and how Voltaire, with all his greatness and all his narrowness, expresses perfectly the clear hard outlines of the philosophic intellect of the 'Illumination.' In the words of Lamennais, "Avec un goût délicat et sur, il discernait certaines beautés. D'autres lui échappaient. La nature l'avait doué d'une vue cette, mais cette vue n'embrassait qu'un horizon borne." What are the words of Voltaire?—"Vous voulez connaître le Dante. *Des Italiens l'appellent divine, mais c'est une divinité cachée*; peu de gens entendent ses oracles: il a des commentateurs; c'est peut-être encore une raison de plus pour n'être pas compris. Sa

\* "Introduction sur la vie et les œuvres de Dante."

réputation s'affermira toujours parce qu'on le lit guère . . . *on a regardé ce salmagondis comme un beau poème épique.* . . . Dans quel goût est donc ce poème? *Dans un goût bizarre* <sup>1</sup>." The Divine Comedy is a literary hash, a grotesque and fantastic mixture. In a letter to Bettinelli, a fragment of which is quoted by Lamennais in his Introduction, he is still more frank :—" Je fais grand cas du courage avec lequel vous avez osé dire que *le Dante était un fou* et son ouvrage un monstre. J'aime encore mieux pourtant, dans ce monstre, une cinquantaine de vers supérieur à son siècle, que tous les vermisseaux appelés *sonnetti*, qui naissent et qui meurent à milliers aujourd'hui dans l'Italie, de Milan jusqu'à Otrante." This will be sufficient by way of contrast with the modern French interpreters of Dante, and will need no comment. The difference of the spirit of Voltaire and the spirit of an age quickened by the Catholic reaction can be discerned instantly. Among the many who have fought the battle of Dante in this century we may single out M. Lafitte, whose theological position I do not know; Lamennais, who was cast out from a Church for which he was too austere noble, and who began an edition of Dante in his last years, when his powers were failing; and M. Edouard Quinet, a living Protestant writer. All of these criticise Dante in a reverent and tender yet not superstitious temper. Each of these criticisms is admirable, though there are certain differences in tone and subtilty. Lamennais, whose critique is naturally the least vigorous, as he wrote under the pressure of sorrow and disenchantment, is chiefly struck by the Divine Comedy as an expression of mediæval dogma and philosophy; Lafitte by the concentrating power of Dante's genius, by the noble unity which he gives to the multiform thoughts, passions, and reveries of the fevered middle age; Quinet, who surpasses both in fine appreciation of Dante, by the Divine Comedy as an omen of dissolution, as at once deeply tinged with the gloom of the Christian hell, and dashed also with mutinous protests against the creed of the past.

Lamennais reminds us how the Divine Comedy is "a

<sup>1</sup> "Dictionnaire Philosophique," 'le Dante.'

complete table of an epoch," a body of politics, history, philosophy, and theology; how the thread of the *Iliad* or the *Paradise Lost* is narrow, compared with the manifold complexity of the burden of Dante; how, instead of a merely national, or a merely dogmatic point of view, we have a poem which sums up human life, all the varied relations of God and man. "Son épopée," he says of Dante, "est tout un monde;" but he adds, and here is the other test of a supreme poem, "*un monde correspondant au développement de la pensée et de la société en un point du temps et sur un point de la terre, le monde du moyen-âge.*" "Human nature, in all times and places, the eternal domain of the past, was his. After the great winter of barbarism the flowers of poetry sprang up. Doubly creative, he created a poem and a language. The grand and simple forms of Dante are sculpturesque. In him we find a philosophy, dead *to us* it is true; but is not the philosophy of Lucretius also dead, yet his poem is immortal; and the same with Dante's theology. Instead of the life of the senses and imagination in which the old world lived we have rigorous dogma, meaningless enough to us, but capable of passing into poetry, just as the commanding doctrines of each age (be they eternal or be they evanescent) have their own high poetry." Such is a short summary of Lamennais' critique on the Divine Comedy.

Lafitte, with greater richness of illustration—(and Lamennais, although he had the gloomy strength of Dante, lacked that fantastic element, that Gothic tinge, as Voltaire might have said, which is necessary for the full understanding of the Tuscan master),—Lafitte helps to fill up the picture". "In philosophy, Dante is the complement of St. Thomas; in history, of Villani; in epic poetry, of Homer and Virgil. He is a complete *man*, like the writers of antiquity—a sword in one hand, a pen in the other. He lives in the Christian middle age without forgetting the Greek and Roman worlds. As Milton was inspired by the Old Testament, and Klopstock by the Gospel, the sovereign poetry of Dante was inspired by the mysteries of the life to come. Barbarism and pedantry there are in Dante, just as there are grotesque (and

" "La Divine Comédie avant Dante."

he might have added obscene) figures in old cathedrals<sup>\*</sup>. But he is supreme, because all the strength and weakness, all the charm and all the uncomeliness of the middle ages lived on in him and are known through him with singular completeness to us. Part of the fascination of the Divine Comedy has gone. We read it admiringly, indeed, but with the mingled terror and mystic joy of the Italians of old. It was the last and the most august vision that the spiritual imagination of Christendom ever formed for itself. In later times such dreamers were not called poets, but only mystics. The Divine Comedy sounds the last note of the mediæval Church, the Decameron sounds the first of the new world. The delirium of the dark ages will soon be over, and Alexander will never again be plunged, as he was by Dante, into a river of boiling blood.

And now before leaving Dante we may give a few of M. Quinet's delicate criticisms in his *Revolutions d'Italie*<sup>†</sup>. He points out the intense personality of the Divine Comedy. The hell, the purgatory, the heaven, reflect the three great moods of one suffering life. First is bitter passionate sorrow, then comes a fiery trial of purification, then reconciliation with God and man. The Divine Comedy is also intensely national. That hell is still Italian<sup>‡</sup>, Italian popes and cardinals help to fill it; that purgatory, that heaven, are still a suffering, a beatified Italy. M. Quinet draws our attention further to some points eminently significant of the middle ages. Like the Catholic Church, the Divine Comedy has its root not in joy but in sorrow. Dante's heaven is sadder than his purgatory; there is no Beatrice, only austerer saints. In Dante, also, for the first time in literature, we find thoughts too grievous for man, "l'homme écrasé de sa propre pensée." These are, indeed, true criticisms. How much the simple sentences of M. Quinet initiate us into the secret of the mediæval spirit, as preserved in

<sup>\*</sup> M. Lafitte gives us many interesting cases of mediæval carvings, such as those at Auxerre, and at Notre-Dame in Paris, the last of which Dante must actually have seen, and which may have helped to inspire him.

<sup>†</sup> i. 7.    <sup>‡</sup> "La Jérusalem mystique est construite des débris de Florence."

Dante. In the ancient world thinking was severe, but not crushing; sorrow was rarer than joy. In mediæval Europe the weight of mystery pressed to agony; joy but faintly checkered suffering. But it is chiefly as an omen of a dying age that M. Quinet contemplates Dante. His atmosphere is charged with the lightnings that had begun to flash in the days of Michael Angelo. Like the Koran, the Divine Comedy is "sicklied o'er with the pale cast" of doom. It was written at the era of St. Francis of Assissi and the "Everlasting Gospel" of the Abbot Joachim. Hence, alone of great poems, it begins with the grave. The terrors of the world to come were painted with terrific vividness by the foremost man, and therefore the most passionate soul of a generation in whose ears were sounding one long *Dies Iræ* :—

"Tuba mirum spargens sonum  
Tres sepulchra regionum  
Coget omnes ante thronum."

The old world is breaking up. MAN is judge; *he* dares, through Dante, to anticipate his Creator's sentence. The Divine Comedy is pregnant with the audacity of the modern spirit; it is a passionate attempt to break loose from mediævalism. In M. Quinet's words it is "Un apocalypse de la société laïque. Chacun voulait y découvrir une face nouvelle du monde moral." Elsewhere he speaks of its tendency "à l'universalité religieuse, qui va jusqu'à embrasser le paganisme lui-même dans la loi de l'évangile éternel:" it is "la sanctification de la philosophie . . . l'église rajeunie et démocratique." We have lingered thus long on Dante and his critics to shew that his divine poem is a noble subject, one of the subjects *par excellence* for literary criticism, and that in no case has the modern spirit of interpretative criticism been so finely displayed.

Leaving austerity, we come to *the many-sided modern spirit* and its interpreters, whom we have agreed to be supreme subjects for criticism. Of these interpreters we might choose many. Against the Homer and Æschylus of the Greeks we can place Shakespeare, Milton, and the brilliant school of nineteenth century English poetry in England,



and the august name of Goëthe in Germany. Each and all of these are adequate subjects for the highest literary criticism. Having endeavoured, in dealing with Homer and Dante, to give significant specimens of thoroughly imperfect and thoroughly admirable criticism, we shall content ourselves with far vaguer sketches of the great interpreters of the modern world ; not that their task has been easier, it has been more complex and arduous, and in some respects more absolutely difficult, but the method being the same with all fit subjects, a more cursory and suggestive notice may be forgiven. To give instances of successful criticism on Shakespeare would be presumptuous, where so much remains to be done. It may be enough to mention how here again Voltaire and Dr. Johnson displayed sheer ignorance, and how it was left, not for an Englishman, but for a German, Schlegel (although his style of criticism is now somewhat old-fashioned), to shew us the greatness of our own divine poet ; and how the work of popularising one, whose glory was only obscured by the thickness of our insular intelligence, was done by Coleridge, who may be said to have introduced a taste in England for the noblest English master. Yet Shakespeare still remains without an adequate critic. Many subtle and discriminating remarks have been made upon him, especially Mr. Robertson's, in his *Lectures to Working-Men*, and an attempt of a physician's to analyze the spiritual pathology of *Hamlet* ; but no one complete effort has as yet been made to reveal his genius, except, perhaps, by Gervinus.

Of Milton less may be said. From the possibly unhappy choice of a limited subject he has limited the exhibition of his power ; and even Professor Seeley, who has lately analyzed his intellectual and poetical character with deep sympathy<sup>a</sup>, leaves us with a suggestion of what he *might* have done. No one speculates as to what Shakespeare *might* have done. He has done enough to bewilder a world of critics ; and if such a master can have had a fault, it is exotic profusion. So two good criticisms only on Milton's poetry will suffice. The one is Professor Seeley's, where he points out the union, in Milton's great Epics, of Hebrew

<sup>a</sup> Lecture on Milton. Macmillan, February, 1869.

austerity with a Greek love of severe and pure form, combined with the first perfect picture of the Greek character in English literature. As Shakespeare re-discovered the ancient Romans for us, so, he observes, Milton "re-discovered for us the ancient Greeks." Samson Agonistes he cites as the best example of Milton's most perfect work of art. The other is Mr. Robertson's<sup>b</sup>. Pointing out the egoism—although in a noble sense—of Milton, he shews us that the *man* is everywhere plain in Milton. "His domestic miseries are reflected in his Samson Agonistes. In his *Comus*, that majestic poem to chastity, are blended the antique heroism of his pagan studies and the Christian sanctities of his rare manhood. His very angels argue upon Puritan questions; and it was the taunt of Pope, that in the eternal lips themselves redemption is a contrivance or scheme according to the systematic theology of a school-divine. And yet the egoism with which all his poetry is impregnated is the egoism of a glorious nature." This broad and simple kind of criticism corresponds admirably with the broad and simple lines of Milton's genius, grand as it is, whether in majesty, egoism, or austerity. We feel on reading such comments as if we understood Milton. Goëthe is still more in need of an interpreter in England, not that his world-embracing genius is denied, it is enthusiastically believed in, but excepting Mr. Carlyle, who in England can be said to have even attempted to explain him? And yet, if so sacred a word may be used without profanity, the vicarious agonies of his *Faust* sum up the bitterest and most complex problems of the modern spirit. It may be said of Goëthe,—

"Il porta le flambeau dans l'abîme de l'être"<sup>c</sup>.

*Faust* is not an echo from ancient Arabia, like *Job*, or an echo from the middle ages, like the *Divine Comedy*, it is written by a modern for modern men. The great problem of the human soul, its place in the universe, its destiny, its

<sup>b</sup> First Lecture to Working-Men on Poetry, pp. 170, 171.

<sup>c</sup> Voltaire, Sonnet to the King of Prussia. Strangely enough this lofty praise—of penetration into the mysteries of our being—is given to the brilliant poet of courtly life—Pope.

satisfaction, is there cast in a dramatic mould. And the problem is deepened. Instead of the old difficulties of the righteous man who sees the wicked flourishing, instead of the old seductions of the flesh—simple and animal—we have the new and more ghastly picture of the God-forsaken intellect. Faust embodies the austere truth—a modern experience—that the most subtle and deadly temptations come to men not through the flesh directly but through the intellect and the imagination to the flesh. First comes lawless thinking and lawless dreaming, and the end of these things is the second death of atheism and lust.

Nor is this all. Dante's Beatrice and Goëthe's Marguerite mark opposite poles of the human spirit. In Dante knowledge is still divine and satisfying. Beatrice is philosophy under the form of perfect womanhood. In Faust all is changed. Man has eaten of the tree of knowledge, and curses the day when he touched that deadly fruit. His idea in his despair is not philosophy but an artless peasant girl<sup>d</sup>.

And now before leaving this part of our subject of supreme poetry, let us point out the fitness of the great school of our own poetry as matter for literary criticism. Byron, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Keble,—to understand them is to understand the inner spirit, the key-note of our century. Most of these are rather subjects for future literary criticism. Little has been done towards a full and generous appreciation of the magnificent genius of Byron. Perhaps the most worthy effort has been that of a living critic of poetry, himself a poet, in a preface to selections from Byron. But the tumultuous roll of his grander style, the richness of his fancy, the intense passion of his sensuous episodes, and above all the austere majesty of his descriptive passages, and the tremulous and feminine tenderness of his gentler mood, all these have rarely been quickened into fresh glory by the hand of sympathetic criticism. How few now read his episode of Newstead Abbey, illuminated as it is by a soft background of heavenly light around his Aurora Raby. How few value Don Juan at its true value, and perceive that its offences against purity are but those of a light and jesting

<sup>d</sup> Cf. Quinet, "Revolutions d'Italie."

irony, and that this wonderful poem, with its rise and fall of splendour and gloom, of grotesque terror and dissolving sweetness, is one of the highest manifestations of the highest ideal mood.

With Shelley and Keats, again, the work of interpretation is in the main undone. It is deeply to be lamented that all De Quincey's notices of their poems were only fugitive sketches, grievously irritating, by the suggestions they throw out, of what that mighty master of criticism might have done. But the time may come when the great secrets of the poetry of these Greek geniuses, lighting up the gloom of our northern skies, will be fully revealed. Keble, immeasurably below them in genius, coequal with the greatest poets of our century, as exhibiting many striking and lofty moods of the modern English spirit, has been more fortunate. The task of criticism was easier; the mystery was less thick. Spiritual experiences appeal to all; intellectual and æsthetic experiences never have been, and never will be, equally popular. They will always be, more or less, a counsel of perfection. Living writers have contributed many delicate and exquisite studies of his charming writings, and have shewed

"The hidden ground  
Of thought, and of austerity within"

as well as the tinge of spiritual narrowness, the unhealthy and ecclesiastical manner of accepting Nature, accepting it not as a Greek but as a Christian father, misled by curious and strained analogies. Leaving him, we will conclude our illustrations of the functions of criticism working in the field of great poetry by the inimitable Wordsworth. He, too, has been fortunate. Two excellent and subtle critics, De Quincey and Robertson, have laid bare the workings of his soul and his lessons to the world. Mr. Robertson has finely brought out the *unworldliness* of Wordsworth's poetry, by which he means its perpetual background of faith in the spiritual and invisible<sup>1</sup>, the *childlike* character of his poems in the best sense<sup>2</sup>, their delicate perception of

<sup>1</sup> Mr. M. Arnold, vol. ii. "The Muse."

<sup>2</sup> Lecture on Wordsworth.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

the mysterious side of the life of nature, and their generous sanctification of common life and feeling.

De Quincey<sup>1</sup> has pointed out the grave literary defects of the *Excursion*, but the greatness of Wordsworth's poetry is in expressing more deeply and more tenderly the broad and permanent but still common moods of feeling; in a word, he has pointed out how Wordsworth's poems are high art.

We have treated at length, and with numerous illustrations, of the first and great function of interpretative literary criticism—the attempt to penetrate the spirit of the highest poems. We will now, far more briefly, suggest the second function,—*the separation of inferior works, however noble, from the highest art*, and the revelation of the causes which have made some great writers fall short of perfection. Literary criticism will sit in judgment upon famous authors, and will state the reason of her sentence. Thus she may refuse the highest reward to Euripides, while she gives it to Homer, Æschylus, and Sophocles, because Euripides, although a good literary artist, is too worldly and too limited in his scope, too much the expression of a fashionable and cynical society, in fact more Athenian than Hellenic. In Roman literature we still may discern a falling short of greatness, for the genius of Rome was more expressed in action and polity than in writing. The great monument of ancient Rome is rather the whole fabric of the mediæval Church than a body of the highest literature. Virgil and Lucretius she may except, Virgil for his artistic finish, Lucretius for 'his divinity of stormy music', though his taint of disease and death may lead even to *his* exclusion from perfect literature. Passing on to Italy, she will discriminate Dante from the exquisite but, speaking comparatively, the lower poets of the Italian decadence. She will shew the narrowness of Petrarch, with his lyrics of solitary love, with his passion, "the first of human passions" in the middle age, "of which God was not the object;" she will shew the touch of despair in Tasso, Tasso the *disillusionné*, the melancholy unreality of his attempt in the pale morning of the modern world to

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth, vol. v.

<sup>1</sup> De Quincey's "Keats," pp. 271-2.

recall the gorgeous images of chivalry and the dying creed that had given it birth and was perishing with it. So in Spain, criticism will perhaps refuse to Cervantes a co-equal rank with Dante, since his matchless romance is after all not a concentration of strong and healthy passion, but a charming threnody over a great idea that had worked its work, and in obedience to the inexorable law of human things was destined to pass away; we say threnody, for the undertone of Don Quixote, with all its humour, is one of sorrow.

Similarly, in separating the great English poets who have touched the deepest and noblest emotions of our nature, literary criticism will point out the moral coldness and artificial tone that degrades Pope—rich, harmonious, and withal masculine as he is—from the highest rank; the lack of breadth that prevents Cowper, with all his natural charms and graces, and with all his occasional bursts of Miltonic fire, from being ranked with Byron or Wordsworth. Yet in any case she will see in Cowper's genius the 'humble upper-waters' of the new poetry of simplicity and nature, of sympathy with the world and with man in their plainest and commonest as well as in their most subtle phases and august manifestations.

Nor will this separation of the highest art from lower efforts be confined to the field of poetry, it will be equally necessary in another equally representative form of literature, in fiction. It will be an important office of the literary critic to discriminate great imaginative writings like *Candide* in the eighteenth and *Les Misérables* in the nineteenth century from the crowd of less powerful fictions, reflecting less vividly the peculiar traits of Voltairean France or the France of the second empire. The novel has been for the last hundred years, and promises to be for several generations to come, the most perfect expression of modern life; and it is a significant fact that many of the most crucial problems of morality and society have been most successfully solved not so much by poetry or by formal discussion as by the drama, or still more perfectly by studies of human character in works of fiction. All speculations on social or political questions

must sooner or later affect individual life, and there can therefore be no severer test of the soundness of theories than an attempt to realise remote but inevitable results through romance. The chief question about every new system of intellectual temper is, after all, what will its effect be on the most sensitive and cultivated men and women? And this question is best asked in works of fiction. But this will not be the sole office of the critic in passing judgment upon the novels of his own or past generations, it will be his duty also to see how far he can extract history, the finest social history, from those books which being marked with the stamp of high art, preserve the spirit of fascinating periods in the development of society. Literary criticism may thus recognise the genuine merit of Miss Austen's pictures of English life some half century ago, and the higher merit of Lord Lytton's novels in enabling us to realise the brilliant days when something of a halo of German romanticism and knight-errantry, shrouded with darker tints of unhealthy passion, was thrown around the "jeunesse dorée" of London and Paris. Again, to come closer to the present, it is probable that the excellence of Mr. Kingsley's *Yeast* and of his *Alton Locke* will be more deeply felt now that the first glow of a not ungenerous Chartism has failed, and now that English society is just a little wearied of the particular religious enthusiasms of 1848. And turning to nobler writers than these, if it is asked who have shewn most eloquently the spiritual force of English Protestantism with all its unloveliness, and the spiritual failure of French religion with all its charms, we should undoubtedly be justified in answering that the first work has been done by the author of *Adam Bede* and the author of *Jane Eyre*, while the second has been done with painful completeness by living Frenchmen, to name one among many, like M. Maxime Du Camp in his *Forces Perdues*. And even passing from studies of modern life like these, it will be one of the literary critic's plainest duties to shew that Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth* may be compared with justice to one of the best dramas of the younger Alexandre Dumas, *Le Fils Naturel*, for the firm and yet delicate touch with which two questions of modern casuistry

are handled, the question of how far truth is always sacred, and the question of how far lost purity can be atoned for. As a concluding instance, the novels of Mr. Wendell Holmes may be mentioned as perhaps the best attempt in literature to analyze the psychology of error, and to determine more scientifically, and therefore more righteously, the true limits of human responsibility.

Instances of the third and last interpretative function of literary criticism have already been given in the Spanish casuists and mystics and the Celtic poets. Brilliant ages like these—the sixth century in Western Europe and the seventeenth in Spain—have much need of careful and sympathising criticism. To us especially, as Englishmen, it would be a new moral experience to reconstruct the ethical colouring of an age when *littérateurs* and men of the world accepted the doctrines of Sanchez and Liguori, and tolerated the spiritual intensity, the morbid, and therefore imperfect, poetry of S. John of the Cross.

As regards the Celtic world, much has been done both in France and England to recall to us the beautiful and healthy life of that less vigorous race which has no history, and therefore which lives in scattered poetry, and in that alone.

II. But literary criticism is also *corrective*, and although this function can, perhaps, be stated less elaborately, it is not less important. The purification of language we have agreed to be scarcely the work of criticism proper. In correcting some characteristic and almost inevitable faults even of excellent literature, the censorship of the literary critic will be rather concerned with the form and spirit of able writers as a whole, and especially with their spirit, of the general tone which they adopt in communicating their ideas to the world. Faults like undue attempts at brilliancy in style, or perhaps, on the other hand, at epigrammatic precision, may fairly be censured, as they uniformly are by the French Academy. But the higher corrective office of criticism is more concerned with the tone of literary men. M. Renan<sup>k</sup>, in giving a sketch of the rise of the French Academy and in defending its existence, mentions the de-

<sup>k</sup> "Essais de Morale et de Critique." Acad. Française.



pression of what he calls a "basse littérature," a bourgeois literature, as one of its legitimate objects, but as its chief aim he singles out this correction of tone. It is the tendency of men of letters to form themselves into an exclusive society, with its own habits of looking on the world, its own style of expression. Now the esoteric language, the intellectual short-hand thus formed may satisfy the few, but it has a fatal liability to chill the warmth and to corrupt the simplicity of sound thinking and feeling. In a word, it has a tendency to make literature pedantic. This obscurity, this affectation, this estrangement from the ordinary flow of life, this forgetfulness that literature should continually draw its inspiration from the actual world, and that it only exists for the sake of that world,—all these faults it is the function of literary criticism to correct. If science is to become scholastic, there had better be no science at all. If literature becomes pedantic, it destroys the only reason for its existence. In no department of human life do we want "erudition sans lumière," sunless pedantry. Criticism should always remind the literary class that some of the greatest writers, like Bossuet and Lord Bacon, have been men of action and men of the world. We cannot have a better guide in this matter than Boileau, who reminds poets that the greater part of high intellectual education is gained not in the closet, but in the school of social life: "Il faut savoir encore et converser ET VIVRE<sup>1</sup>." A free circulation must ever be kept up between general civilized society and literature, for the rigour and ascetic seclusion which is pardonable and even necessary in a man of science, is noxious and paralysing in a man of letters. There is nothing in poetry and literature generally that ought to require technical formulas to express it, or a technical training to understand it. A delicate and flexible intellect, which has lost nothing of its masculine vigour in acquiring a finer temper, is the true instrument as well for life and action as for literature. It is a sign of healthy age when practical men purify and refine their spirits by continual access to literature, and when literary men, without abdicating the

<sup>1</sup> Art Poétique, chant iv.

liberty of genius, both think and express themselves like men of the world.

Such may be said to be the *functions* of literary criticism. But an art so far-reaching, so ambitious, must continually trench upon the border-land of other forms of human energy, intellectual and spiritual. Of these, the intellectual may be shortly summed up as *Science* in its narrower sense of physical and mental enquiry, and as *History*, although History in the view of some is itself a possible if not an actual science. Beyond the sphere both of Science and of History is *Religion*. Literary Criticism thus stands in broad contrast, in anti-thesis if not in contradiction, to *Science*, to the spirit of *Religion*, or rather of *Theology*, and in less sharp contrast to *History*.

*Firstly, literary criticism limits and is limited by Science.* Science has for its object pure truth, truth in its most rigid and most naked form. In the physical branch of scientific enquiry man endeavours to forget himself, to project himself into the phenomenal universe, and without calling into account his own hopes and fears, his own innumerable moods of passion, to fix upon some points of plain external certainty. Internal satisfaction must, if necessary, be sacrificed. The only lawful aspiration is to the philosopher the aspiration of the speculative intellect. Dissolution of cherished faiths is not courted, but it must ever be accepted, if it is a condition of increased scientific certainty.

It is this rigorous and despotic character of physical, and to a great extent of mental, science that makes the scientific temper the opposite pole to the theological. It is this same character of the scientific spirit that makes it also the opposite pole to the spirit of literature, and especially of the most intense form of literature, poetry. Hence, as the first requisite of the literary critic is sympathy with his subject, he will always feel a certain repulsion when confronted with Science. Science limits him by its austere demand for truth at any cost. Literary criticism in interpreting poetry to the world, and therefore to men of science, as a part of it, will limit the sphere of Science by reminding society that the pursuit, simply and rigorously, of pure truth is good, but that something

else is better—the satisfaction of the spirit through the senses and imagination. It will remind an age devoted to the discovery of hard cold facts that the victories of the masculine intellect and the problems of the external universe are great, but that ‘life and death are greater and older.’ Literary criticism will thus eternally recall the world to the august primal facts of man and passion. Again, in its relation to Science, literary criticism by glorifying poetry will give us a pledge that the time will come when Science shall be again imaginative, and that the time *may* come when the conclusions of the intellect and the aspirations of the soul will cease to conflict. “Science destroys poetry, until the heart bursts into mysticism, and out of Science brings poetry again; asserting a wonder and a vague mystery of life and feeling, beneath and beyond all science.” “Poetry creates life, Science dissects death<sup>m</sup>.” These were the words of an enthusiastic literary critic, who saw the function of his art aright, namely to mediate between Science and unscientific passion.

*Secondly, literary criticism is limited by theology.* It is the aim of theological criticism to dogmatize and to purify, among many opinions to choose the soundest, among many conceptions of the relations of man to God to select and consecrate those which are recommended by the highest authority, whether internal or external; among many phases of passion to purify and ennoble those, and those only, which intensify the religious spirit, which tend to absorb man, not in the universe, not in himself, but in God. Exclusion, and narrowing of thought and feeling, for the sake of truth and concentration, are the objects of theological criticism. This temper corrects and limits the undogmatic comprehensiveness of literary criticism which endeavours earnestly to become cosmopolitan, to realise with the most ardent sympathy every mood of human feeling, whether it be Aryan or Semitic, Hellenic or Teutonic, simple and sensuous, or profound and spiritual. This broad and unquestioning accept-

<sup>m</sup> Robertson's Lectures to Working-Men, pp. 113, 120. The same thought is contained in a very poetical setting in the latter part of *Contarini Fleming*, part v. chap. xviii.

ance of the whole field of human passion as we find it is the distinguishing mark of literary criticism, just as a craving not for *the most* but for the *best* is the distinguishing mark of theology. One demands light, the other warmth.

*Lastly, literary criticism has relations to history.* What is the limit between literary and historical criticism? Historical criticism is partly negative, partly constructive. Its solvent negative side is thoroughly alien to literary criticism, which rests invariably upon a basis of accepted fact. Where doubt enters, literary criticism disappears. Until the historical and philological questions about Homer and Dante have been settled, or at least dismissed from the mind, there is no room for literary criticism. But grant an authentic work of poetical art, and then the fine sympathies of criticism come into play. With the other side of historical criticism, its creative side, literary criticism has a close affinity, though here also there is a limit, real, if not always absolutely definite. Constructive historical criticism strives from recorded facts, illustrated indeed by the contemporary plastic arts and poetry, to re-create the life of the past; literary criticism also aims at re-creating the past, but it does so by starting not from facts directly, but from literature, from those forms in which the most vigorous spirits of each era incorporated their inner and therefore their truer and more vital history. Historical criticism deals with inorganic, literary criticism, with organic forms. Working as it does perpetually hand in hand with the most active historical criticism of the creative order, it is itself a nobler, finer, and more ambitious kind of history, recovering for us the more delicate essence of the spirit of the past by creating a philosophy of literature, as a complement of the philosophy of history in the stricter though lower sense. Like the ideal wisdom of old, literary criticism should aspire to be "*Omnia prospiciens et qui capiat omnes spiritus, intelligibilis, mundus, subtilis.*"















